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Supporting Stability, Abetting Repression

By TOBIAS HAGMANN

BERKELEY, CALIFORNIA — Next time I travel to Ethiopia, I may be arrested as a terrorist. Why? Because I have published articles about Ethiopian politics.

I wrote a policy report on Ethiopia's difficulties with federalism. I gave a talk in which I questioned Ethiopia's May 2010 elections, in which the ruling EPRDF party (Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front) won 545 out of 547 seats in the Parliament. As part of my ongoing research on mass violence in the Somali territories, I interviewed members of the Ogaden National Liberation Front, a separatist rebel group in eastern Ethiopia that the government has designated as a terrorist organization.

In the eyes of the government of Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, my work is tantamount to subversion. Not only do his officials have zero tolerance for criticism, they consider people who either talk to or write about the opposition as abetting terrorists.

In recent years the government has effectively silenced opposition parties, human rights organizations, journalists and researchers. On June 27 a federal court convicted the journalist [Eskinder Nega](#) and 23 opposition politicians for "participation in a terrorist organization." More than 10 other journalists have been charged under an anti-terrorism law introduced in 2009. Among them are two Swedes, [Martin Schibbye](#) and [Johan Persson](#), who are serving an 11-year prison sentence in Ethiopia. Hundreds of opposition supporters languish in prisons for exercising the very democratic rights that the Ethiopian Constitution nominally protects.

Most people outside Ethiopia associate the country with famine and poverty. They know little about the country's history and politics — for example that Ethiopia was never colonized, or that it has Africa's second biggest population. Nor are they aware that Ethiopia is a darling of the donor community, receiving more aid than any other African country. Over the past year alone, the U.S. Agency for International Development has given Ethiopia \$675 million in aid. The United States closely collaborates with Ethiopia in covert missions against radical Islamists in neighboring Somalia.

Much of this support comes from the portrayal of Ethiopia as a strong and stable government in a region riddled with political upheaval. The problem, however, is that Ethiopia is plagued by too much state control.

When EPRDF came to power in 1991, it promised to democratize the country. Two decades later the party has a tight grip on all public institutions, from the capital to remote villages. Formally a federal democracy, Ethiopia is a highly centralized one-party state. No independent media, judiciary, opposition parties or civil society to speak of exist in today's Ethiopia. Many of the country's businesses are affiliated with the ruling party. Most Ethiopians do not dare to discuss politics for fear of harassment by local officials.

As I found out in dozens of interviews with Ethiopian Somalis, security forces indiscriminately kill, imprison and torture civilians whom they suspect of aiding Ogaden rebels.

How have donors who fund about one third of Ethiopia's budget and many humanitarian programs reacted to this? They haven't. They not only continue to support the Ethiopian government but in recent years have increased their aid. The West, most prominently the United States and the European Union, have concluded a strange pact with Meles Zenawi: So long as his government produces statistics that evince economic growth, they are willing to fund his regime — whatever its human rights abuses.

This policy is wrong, shortsighted and counterproductive. It is wrong because billions in Western tax money are spent to support an authoritarian regime. It is shortsighted because it ignores the fact that the absence of basic rights and freedoms is one of the reasons Ethiopians are so poor. It is counterproductive because many Ethiopians resent the unconditional aid and recognition given to their rulers. In Ethiopia — and also in Rwanda and Uganda — the West is once again making the mistake of rewarding stability and growth while closing its eyes to repression.

Tobias Hagmann specializes in East African politics. He is a visiting scholar at the Department of Political Science at the University of California at Berkeley.